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ABSTRACT

Composing and telling stories can allow a person to resist and revise those confining stories drafted by others. As an illustration of the powerful role narrative plays in English teachers' research and teaching, a pre-service teacher's autobiographical story narrates her refusal of the oppressive roles she had been assigned. The teacher's story shows how she has begun to listen to her own voice rather than only to the external voices of others. The continuity between this teacher's personal self-reflection and her emerging public discourse and the resulting change in her own sense of authority has been described by the authors of "Women's Ways of Knowing" as the "hallmark of women's emergent sense of agency and control." Eventually this process allowed the pre-service teacher to compose her own definition of herself as a teacher--a process that now enables her to resist the definitions of "teacher" her schooling and her profession would inscribe on her. Telling her own story allowed the pre-service teacher to continue to assert the authority of her own lived and examined experience and to rewrite herself as a woman and a teacher. The relational, rather than rational, nature of knowledge that comes with stories combined with the speculative nature of most stories demands that researchers continually reexamine the stories they tell as well as examine their own responsibilities to those who tell their personal stories. (SAM)

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COMPOSING EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE: NARRATIVE AS A CRITICAL INSTRUMENT IN ENGLISH TEACHER PREPARATION

A Paper Presented to the National Council of Teachers of English

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COMPOSING EXPERIENCE & KNOWLEDGE: NARRATIVE AS A CRITICAL INSTRUMENT IN ENGLISH TEACHER PREPARATION

by David E. Wilson, Joy S. Ritchie, & Carol Gulyas

Introduction

> What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (Heilbrun, 1988.)

We, like Carolyn Heilbrun, believe in the important shaping effect others' stories have on our lives. The uses of narrative in the development of critical understanding have received considerable attention recently. As we have looked specifically at the stories that emerge in ethnographic research, we have come to see that we also need our own stories; they provide us with icons, touchstones, or metaphors by which we live our lives. But as Heilbrun implies, stories can also constrain and position us in identities and roles. "Our stories may lie to us," Sandra Harding notes. Nevertheless, we believe composing and telling stories, including the stories that tell us who we are and who we must be, can allow us to resist and revise those confining stories which others might draft for us. We want to focus on the uses of narrative in two contexts: in the professional and personal development of English teachers and in our work as researchers in English studies.

Our thinking has emerged in the context of a three-year study into the development of knowledge of English and teaching in preservice teachers. Over the course of this study we have interviewed a cohort of our students as they moved through our teacher preparation program and into their first year of teaching. As we listened to the stories our students composed in response to our prompts, we learned that what students come to understand and practice as teachers is largely shaped by the murmured stories they've heard over their years of experience as students in schools and as members of our culture.

While their long apprenticeship in schools has had a profound and continuing impact, we have also found that what teachers come to understand, believe and practice as teachers is also the result of their own identities, personal histories, and agendas and how those identities are mobilized as they come in contact with the roles held out to them by the educational culture. Becoming a teacher involves an on-going process of negotiation and struggle among these various narratives--narratives composed as scripts for them from their histories in gender, social class, racial, ethnic and family groups; multiple and often conflicting narratives of teaching and education in our popular culture; and the narratives surrounding teaching and learning they have composed from seventeen years of experience in educational institutions. All of these stories continue to shape their understandings of teaching and shape them as people in educational institutions.

As we have watched and listened to teachers compose and revise their stories, however, we have discovered that the study itself has been one of the most powerful tools for helping students resist the pull of stories that would narrow and constrain their identities and their notions of language and learning. Over the course of three years in interviews, conversations, and writing, we began to see that our research methodology had become pedagogy. As we asked them to compose, reflect on, and critique their

learning and literacy stories, many of them began to place those stories in dialogue with the stories of teaching and learning they were being told in the literature and writing classes, practica, and classrooms they entered as beginning teachers. We asked them repeatedly to articulate and revise their assumptions about writing and reading, to reexamine what they may have said earlier in the light of a current course or experience and thus to continually reflect, interpret and evaluate. This dialogue allowed them to recognize, often for the first time, contend with and at times break the hold of the narratives murmured and shouted to them by their long apprenticeship in English and education, and by the identities which they have claimed or have claimed them.

In order to illustrate what we've come to believe about the powerful role of narrative in research and teaching, we want Carol, who was one of our study participants, to tell you her story. Carol's story has been crucial to our process of interpretation during our study, and although in many ways she is unlike the other participants, we found surprising similarities and resonances among the stories of twenty-two and twenty-four year olds moving on to their first jobs, to marriages and families and Carol's story. Carol's story has taught us what to look for in other students' stories; it has also helped us re-define the kind of experiences we hope to provide all of our students.

After Carol's story we will reflect on the uses of narrative and how we become implicated in pre-service teachers' stories.

Carol's Story

As I was thinking of how to begin telling my story of the past few years at the University and as a beginning teacher, I realized how difficult it is to go back to the words I used at that time and to claim them as my own. What I said in the many

interviews during the three years of the study is preserved on numerous tapes and transcripts, so as much as I would sometimes like to change the words in those statements, I can't deny they are mine. I can say, however, that I am not that person anymore. As Dave and Joy point out, we are continually changed by the stories we live and hear. I am still growing and learning, and as I do, the things I said in the past seem more and more to belong to some other person.

I remember a conversation I had with my mother when I was twelve or thirteen. It was at the end of the summer, and one warm afternoon we were both in the kitchen washing dishes as we faced the double windows over the sink that looked south toward our pasture, barn and windmill. August was nearly over and I was dreading the start of junior high. I remember blurting out, into the quiet of the kitchen, how I couldn't wait to grow up so I could be somebody else, be different from the self-conscious, awkward adolescent that I felt myself to be. My mother's reply was that I would always be the same person. We couldn't change who we were. She went on to explain that she was exactly the same person she had been as a child or as a teenager. We neither would nor could ever be another person.

Her words both upset and depressed me. If there was one thing I wanted more than anything else in the whole world at that time of my life, it was to be someone else. Now, thirty years later, I understand that my mother may have been speaking on a literal level, but at the time, looking at the world from my self-centered, self-conscious, teenager's perspective, I totally rejected her explanation and became more determined than ever to become that someone "other". However, it wasn't until the past few years that I have finally been able to gain a better understanding of what it means to grow and change and be that new person that I had always wanted to be.

I can never be who I was thirty years ago or even who I was three years ago. As I live my life and reflect on my experiences and tell my stories, I continuously recreate

myself, growing in understanding and expanding my knowledge of myself and the world around me.

In telling my story, I use two voices. The first voice is that of the individual who participated in the study, the person who was just beginning to make sense of the world through reading and writing and through talking with others. The second voice belongs to who I am now, a culmination of all the stories that have come before. As I went about blending the two voices in this paper, I was surprised to discover how well they complemented one another, like getting information on an event from several sources and then putting them together to form a clearer picture of what actually took place.

I begin with a quote from one of my earliest interviews:

> I was really different when I was a kid. I don't know if I can talk about it. It's still very painful. I guess I was a rebel, but as a defense mechanism for being different; different because I never quite fit in with the other kids, was always dressed differently, didn't have the money to do things either. We lived far out of town; we were never able to join, and we couldn't afford to join.

This part of my story is easier to tell now and makes more sense to me. I came from a home with an abusive father and very early learned to size up situations in order to determine how I could best protect myself from his physical and verbal assaults. My actions and my language, at any given time, directly contributed to my being safe or not. It was risky to assert myself or to draw my father's attention, and I quickly realized that my safety rested in my ability to adapt myself to situations, to say whatever or be whatever my father wanted to see or hear. I gradually internalized those defense mechanisms, carefully perfecting them through years of practice, and unknowingly transferred them into other aspects of my life.

Having gone to a small country school for the elementary grades, attending a large junior high in the neighboring town was a new and frightening experience for me. I was enough different from the other students that I found myself excluded from their social groups, and as a result, turned to my inner coping skills to get through those long, unhappy years. I did whatever I could to give the impression that it was my choice to be different and thus excluded, wanting to demonstrate to myself and to others that it didn't bother me to be left out.

At the same time, I began looking for a way out of my home and my community, promising myself that if I could only go somewhere where no one knew me, I could start over and be a new person. Once I was in a new place, I reasoned, I could recreate myself in such a way that I would be whoever I had to be to gain acceptance and a sense of belonging.

When I met my future husband at college, he offered me the opportunity I had been seeking. He was from a far-away state, he came from a different cultural and religious background, and he offered me the means of escaping my surroundings. During my seventeen-year marriage, I carefully did what I felt was necessary in order to fit into my husband's family and community.

I willingly chose to conform to the expectations of my husband and his family and to do those things that fit their definition of wife and mother. As time went on, however, I came more and more to realize that I was merely playing a role. I began to see how much I was still an outsider, that I was still different, even though I had become adept at hiding my "otherness". I became less and less willing to continue playing the roles I had once eagerly assumed.

I was increasingly uncomfortable with having to disguise my differences and in having to deny who I was, what I thought, and what I had to say. I began talking about wanting to go back to college for a post-graduate program, an idea that had been

discouraged early in my marriage. I became more and more vocal about women's rights and how both the husband and wife should share equally in the responsibilities of maintaining a home and family. I became an advocate for my children against the oppressive discipline of my husband's patriarchal upbringing. As my outspokenness grew, so too, did the discord in my marriage.

Eventually my husband and I divorced. During the next few years, the struggles I experienced in starting my life over helped me gain an emerging awareness of how the choices I had made in the past had been guided by my need for security and a fear of ever being myself. In order to survive (at least in my own mind), I had had to become what other people expected or wanted of me, thus allowing others to dictate the circumstances of my life.

I moved to a new community and began tentatively to rebuild my life. Now for the first time, I was making choices by following my own inclinations, first of all because of the demands of the situation--I had no one else to make the decisions for me--but more importantly, I wanted to do things myself. I quickly grew to relish having final say in everything I did without anyone questioning my decisions. Even through the fear of failing and the pressures of trying to maintain a job and being a parent to my two young children, I cherished the freedom of being totally on my own. And I followed my life-long dream of going back to school for more education.

Ironically, it was when I returned to the University to get my teaching certification that I next met another group of individuals who had expectations of me that didn't match my own. At first, I reveled in the academic atmosphere that I had secretly coveted for so long.

Several years ago, I talked about how my first couple of years at the University were pretty much what I expected. In one interview I said:

> Everything was cut-and-dried, and I had an answer for everything, took my ed psych courses, learned how to read skills tests and intelligence tests, and how to give these tests--how many nonsense syllables you could remember, and felt that . . . this is hardly to do with education, but it didn't really mean anything for me yet.

The further I got in my degree program, the more uncomfortable I became. When I had first thought of becoming a teacher, I saw myself being the kind of teacher I had always had: someone who stands authoritatively in front of the room (always well dressed) and dispenses information. My expectation was that as soon as I got enough information in my education classes, I too would be allowed to enter that select society of "teachers" and begin passing on what I had learned to others.

During the research study, I talked about a couple of classes I had had with Larry Andrews, a professor in Curriculum and Instruction. I said:

> I credit him with getting me started. He saw something in me that I had never seen, and encouraged me and got me in touch with Dave [Wilson]. People started talking to me as if they saw something in me that I didn't know was there yet . . . . I felt totally inadequate. I didn't know how to think. I was never encouraged to think for myself, in school or in my marriage, because I was always feeding back what other people wanted to hear, either on a test or in a paper, or to other people. My ideas were unimportant. What was important was what other people wanted to hear. Larry would look at me as if I knew what he was talking about, or would say something like, "Well, Carol knows." And I would sit there and say, "Carol doesn't have any idea." And I think that discomfort level was that transition . . . . So it was through that insistence by others that I do have thoughts in my head, that they do want to hear what I have

to say, that I became more aware of what was going on in my head rather than just becoming a mirror to what other people would ask.

Later in that same interview, I spoke about a Composition Theory and Practice class, where I had a similar experience:

> In Comp Theory, free writing was the light bulb that went on in my head. It was so important to have that class where the emphasis was on self-directed learning, and the teacher, Rick Evans, was a writer/learner in the class. . . . I wrote a tremendous amount for that class, and it was just like all these things were pouring out of me and all the confusions, contradictions, stresses and tensions I was experiencing worked out in the journal.

The nurturing environment that I found at the University has been extremely important to me. I'm not sure whether I would have grown and learned as much as I have without that closeness I found with Larry, Rick, Dave, Joy and others, listening to them talk to me and accept me as a person. It's all tied up with my marriage and coming out as an individual as opposed to being a wife or daughter or mother. The voices I was hearing at the University were vastly different from those I had heard in my past. The people I grew to know as instructors and friends were always open to listening to what I had to say. Their insistence on my thinking for myself and in writing about topics that I chose, finally helped me realize that, not only was I in charge of the words that were coming from my mouth and my pen, but that what I had to say was of value. For the first time ever, I had people who actually listened to me. This unfailing acceptance helped me to gradually learn to validate my own thoughts and feelings.

Throughout my years at the University and throughout my time in the research study, I gradually developed and came to trust my own voice. I grew to a better understanding of how I had become the kind of student and teacher I was, and I struggled to make sense of much of the past that had brought me to teaching and to

working with Dave and Joy. And the better I understand my past and the forces which drove me to make the decisions I did in my life, the better I incorporate what I have learned into my teaching.

My greater understanding of myself and my beliefs has come about through experiencing the processes Dave and Joy used in their research study: observation, reflection and questioning. As I articulated my thoughts and feelings over the years of the study, both as a subject of the research and as an assistant researcher, I gradually became more adept at recognizing what I was seeing and hearing as well as finding words to express my interpretations of those events. Not only did the frequent discussions and interviews give me ample opportunities to order and examine my ideas, but the security of knowing that my views of events were valued gave me confidence and courage to trust myself even more.

I see myself as having overcome a long history of living as someone who primarily observed the roles I was playing from the outside rather than immersing myself in the things I did with a real sense of belonging. The more adept I became at reflecting on the events in my life, the more comfortable I became with who I am. I know that I have grown in both experience and understanding. I am better at interpreting what is going on around me, and I participate in the discussions in which my colleagues and I try to make sense of things. I am now an active participant in making meaning of the stories of my life. And because I take ownership of my stories, I am better able to resist the "murmurings" of others who would change who I am as a teacher and a person.

When I first started teaching, I found myself in a small rural school teaching seventh and eighth graders in a K-8 building. Not realizing what I was getting into, I found myself with eight preparations a day, teaching 30-minute classes to accommodate the younger elementary students in the same building. It wasn't long

before I was completely overwhelmed and wondering how I would get through each school day. I struggled along as best I could for several weeks, but finally succumbed to the temptation of assigning the students chapters to read in the textbooks, vocabulary words and worksheets. This kind of teaching was something I knew and understood and it required comparatively less effort on my part. It should have felt familiar and comfortable, but with each succeeding assignment, I knew it was wrong.

Having students fill out sheet after sheet of meaningless, contextless, tedious seatwork was no longer an acceptable form of teaching for me. I knew there were better ways to teach because my own recent experiences as a student at the University told me so. I put the books and worksheets away and started listening to my own voice again. I started journaling about my frustrations and concerns, I questioned why things were happening the way they were, and I invited my seventh and eighth graders to reflect on what they saw going on in class and to share their observations with me. My students and I talked often that first year (and still do) about the nature of learning and what we need to do in school to make that learning happen.

Learning to resist the pressures exerted on me from others has been a result of the merging of a number of factors. On my own, I was realizing the futility of trying to define myself through the roles others expected of me. In my post-graduate work at the University, I had developed relationships with teachers who encouraged me to take risks in my learning and who helped me realize that my ideas and opinions were of value. And finally, I gained both a way to examine the events of my life and a way to articulate my understanding of those events through observation, reflection and questioning, the same processes I attempt to foster with my seventh and eighth grade students in the classroom.

Through observation, I have become aware of the complexities, the interactions, and the relationships between my personal life and my life as a teacher. I can now

better examine the roles I play and consequently, am more able to direct those roles. As I continue to observe and reflect on what goes on around me, I have become more adept at seeing the complexities of my existence, an element that was missing from much of my past. As an observer and as one who reflects on what I observe, I become aware of the subtle nuances of thought and action as well as how interconnected are the relationships between individuals. The more I observe, the better I become at really seeing what is going on around me.

Questions serve to generate a dialogue through personal writing, through journaling with others, and through talk, reflecting on what is happening around me. I have come to realize that there are no simple answers to the hard questions about teaching or about other aspects of my life. By continuing to engage in dialogue and examination of my teaching practice, I am better able to accept how that dissonance adds richness to my experiences. I am no longer frustrated that answers are neither simple nor absolute. I have come to understand that growth and learning comes from that state of discomfort--of never completely "knowing."

I constantly observe, reflect and question what goes on in the classroom along with my students. Having once developed the habit of accepting the complexities of what goes on around me, I continue to see how everything is enriched through human interaction. I try to help my students gain these same patterns of observation and reflection. Together we enter into a dialogue about why school is the way it is. The students frequently open my eyes to new perspectives and issues. We learn from each other.

During graduate school, Larry, Rick, Joy and Dave invited me into their circle of friendship, acceptance and encouragement. I try to do the same for my students. I hesitate to use the word "love" in the context of teaching because it is a socially loaded term when talking about teacher/student relationships. However, I think love is the

only word that accurately describes the degree of acceptance, support and unstinting belief in me as a person that I felt among my colleagues at the University. I love my students and I try to let them know that I regard them as individuals, as people who deserve to be respected and valued without condition. My students and I still are working on what is the "right" way to learn, but I know now that I need to trust the lesson of my own experiences, to listen to what my stories are telling me.

After abandoning the worksheets my first year of teaching, I continually struggled to find ways of teaching that satisfied my beliefs about students and learning. Occasionally wonderful things happened. One afternoon the students were performing skits of stories from Greek mythology that they had written and arranged themselves. Everyone was participating and having great fun. We enjoyed and loudly applauded each successive group's performance. In the midst of this noise and excitement, the door to the classroom suddenly opened and the principal entered, frowning and demanding to know where "Mrs. Gulyas" was. I quickly spoke up from my seat in the audience. All he said was "Oh." He turned to fiddle with the thermostat for a few seconds, then left the room.

Even now, three years later, the pressures I feel from my principal, or other teachers, or parents, or the community to change who I am as a teacher are forces that I have to consciously resist. But I am getting better, both at listening to my own voice and to murmuring my stories to others. I want my students to take ownership of their lives and begin to find the meaning of their stories, and thus ultimately, to authoring their own stories and their own lives. I have lived a success story. I have also lived a story that was leading to an unhappy ending. Learning from both, I want to help my students create stories that end the way they want them to.

Last Monday, David came to visit me after school. He was in my eighth grade class last year, and we had talked a lot about school and learning and why things

happen the way they do for students. David and I talked about how his classes were going in ninth grade. He was doing well and told me about all the good grades on his report card. "I don't think my history teacher likes me," was David's next remark. Somewhat surprised since David pretty much matched my idea of the perfect student, I asked why he thought that. "I ask too many questions," was his reply. I don't remember exactly what I said to David then, but I know inside I was ecstatic. David is going to be okay.

Some After-thoughts on Carol's Story

Carol's story persuades us that telling our stories can be an "original, critical instrument" for articulating and thus resisting and revising the constraints placed on our social roles and identities. In Carol's case, the story-telling that provoked and aided her resistance occurred as she wrote her journals, composed her story for us over a period of three years, and provoked, listened to, and wrote the stories of her peers. Several experiences in her life converged to provoke and support her in beginning to compose her life with a new set of definitions of woman and mother.

Carol was confronted with experiences that enabled her to recognize and claim her own marginality or otherness. The recognition and naming of her status as an outsider provided Carol with what bell hooks has described as a "site of radical possiblity, a space of resistance" because it called for and nourished the possibility of refusing the oppressive roles to which she had been assigned; it gave her another option in response to social expectations. As a result she has begun to listen to her own voice rather than only to the external voices of others and now critiques their expectations rather than always accommodating them. The continuity between Carol's personal self-reflection and her emerging public discourse and the resulting change in her sense of authority has been described by the authors of *Women's Ways*

of Knowing as the "hallmark of women's emergent sense of agency and control." Eventually this process allowed Carol to compose her own definition of herself as teacher--a process that now enables her to resist the definitions of "teacher" in which our society, much of her own schooling, her present school system, and even the teaching profession would inscribe her.

Carol also had found a place where she was not left on the outside. She developed mutually caring and respectful professional relationships. Although we have seldom theorized the significance of love, caring, or respect in our discipline, Carol derived from that acceptance and caring the capacity to claim her own authority to develop her own professional voice as a writer and teacher.

Carol then used her composed and reflected-upon experiences as a lens through which to examine her own classroom and to reflect on the experiences of her students. Carol's own story telling had allowed her to bring together reflection and critique of her personal life and her professional life. Rather than being locked into the murmured stories and scripts that would prescribe limited personal and professional identities, Carol used her examined experience to help her resist and re-write those scripts and stories. In doing this, Carol is able to continue to assert the authority of her lived and examined experience, re-writing herself as woman and as teacher.

Using Narrative in Teacher Education

What we've found to be dramatically true of Carol, we've found to be less dramatically true of her younger classmates, for example Melissa, Tina, and Sam. We began to understand that Melissa's experience as a single mother, Tina's experience as an unmarried college student who gave up for adoption her interracial child, and Sam's experience as the eldest son of divorced parents have profoundly shaped who they are as individuals and teachers.

Carol and her classmates' stories have prompted us to take our research methodologies with us into our classrooms. In undergraduate and graduate classes--like Composition Theory and Practice, English Methods, and the Nebraska Literacy Project--we have begun more systematically to invite students, all of them prospective or practicing teachers, to tell and reflect on two kinds of stories. Some of these stories address their own literacy development both inside and outside schools. Others occur in teaching journals where they describe and reflect on the dynamics of their classrooms and their students' lives.

We have seen actualized the power that Freire, Grumet, and others claim for stories. These stories become a kind of primary text in these classes, enabling us to uncover our unspoken assumptions; examine the contradictions between our pedagogies and our experiences; complicate our understandings of literacy, learning, and teaching; integrate our examined experiences into our working conceptions of literacy and learning; develop intimacy and build community; and provide us a sense of our own authority as we enter or continue to work within the powerful culture of schools. The result of all this, Carol's story leads us to hope, is a kind of resistance to and revision of the culture of schools.

Afterthoughts: Some Questions on "Using" Narrative

We have talked about the ways stories have been of use to us as researchers and as teachers, but we think we must also begin to more explicitly explore our relationship to these stories and their tellers. We believe it is important to acknowledge that the stories we select and "collect" as teachers and as researchers do not simply remain as abstractions or "tools" for us to "use," to inform our work or to get us tenured or promoted. We need to acknowledge our own implication, attraction, and connection to these stories.

We think back to a memorable moment in our work together. We had driven two-and-a-half hours on a two-lane road to a small town near the South Dakota border where, Melissa, one of the participants in our study, was a first-year teacher. We'd arranged to spend a few hours in her classroom, have lunch with her, and do a final series of interviews with her.

As we drove home after our visit we each confessed to feeling moved, depressed, almost overwhelmed as we reflected on what we had heard her say. In Melissa we each saw ourselves--Dave as a young teacher in a small town in Iowa, Joy in a suburban school in North Carolina. Both of us had felt the powerful socializing force of the school and community on our identities, our assumptions about who we were as teachers and as people. Hearing her story provoked us to tell and examine our own. Hearing her story also drew us closer to her and her life as a small-town teacher.

We realize now that as researchers we can't escape being implicated in the narratives we gather to do our work. Our research brings us into intimate contact with lives, developing close relationships which Carol described as "caring" and "love". We find ourselves captivated by and transformed by these lives. As surely as our contact with Carol helped her transform her life, she has changed us. We might have attempted to maintain the stance of neutral, objective researchers. But we believe that to do this would be to deny the very nature of the relationships that narrative ways of knowing presuppose. As researchers "using" stories in our work, we need to remember the very nature of stories--they are not neutral objects. They invite us--even command us--into relationship with the teller The borders of stories are fluid and permeable; stories always become something else, the same story yet different, changed and transformed by the teller and by the hearer. In our selection and "use" of them, they draw us in, taint us, revise us. Because of the relational, rather than rational

nature of knowledge that comes with stories and because of the speculative and generative nature of stories, they demand that as researchers we continually reexamine the stories we tell and examine our responsibilities to those who tell us their stories.